

Besant, Annie



nee Wood, (1847-1933). Annie Besant was a woman of intellect and leadership who courageously went beyond the limited Victorian female gender role to become the foremost and influential woman orator and political activist of her day. She briefly embraced theism during the transitional period in which she rejected Christian doctrines and legally separated from her husband, an Anglican vicar. For fifteen years Besant was a public proponent in England of atheism, scientific materialism, and Freethought, who strove to achieve better employment, living conditions, and education for the poor. Toward the end of her atheistic period, Besant became a socialist, who was convinced that by legal and political change, socialism would achieve the amelioration of human misery caused by industrialization and the enclosures of Common Lands. In 1889 after reviewing [Helena P. BLAVATSKY'S](#) *The Secret Doctrine*, Besant became the most well-known advocate of Theosophy, and in 1907 she was elected the second president of the Theosophical Society (Adyar) in which office she served for the rest of her life. Besant lived in India, which she believed to be her true homeland due to previous incarnations there. By means of public lectures, Besant sought to raise Hindus' pride in their religious and cultural heritage. Besant and the Theosophical Educational Trust founded numerous schools in which a Hindu as well as a modern curriculum were imparted. The Central Hindu College founded by Besant in Benares became the nucleus for the Benares Hindu University, which awarded her an honorary doctorate. After becoming thoroughly acquainted with Indian culture and values, Besant began working in India for social reform, women's rights, and Home Rule. Besant was in 1917 the first woman elected president of the Indian National Congress. Concurrently Besant adopted and arranged for the education of J. KRISHNAMURTI, whom she believed would become the physical vehicle for the World Teacher, the Lord [MAITREYA](#), whose teachings would usher in a New

Civilization in which all persons would perceive the divine monistic whole of which all are a part, thus actualizing universal brotherhood.

The unifying concern throughout Annie Besant's multifaceted career was her ultimate commitment to serve humanity to effect human transformation and eliminate suffering. During her long career Besant accomplished much in terms of her social, political, and religious work, and very importantly she became a model for other women seeking to move beyond the limitations of their socialization in the patriarchal female gender role.

Early Life, 1847-1872 (to age 25). Annie Wood (Besant) was born October 1, 1847, in London to parents of predominantly Irish blood, Emily Roche Morris Wood and Burton Perse Wood. Her father, who had earned a medical degree and was skeptical of religion, died when Annie was five. Her mother was a devout Anglican who favored the tolerant views of the Broad Church theologians. Annie was the second of three children; her elder brother was Henry Wood, and her younger brother was Alfred. Alfred died shortly after his father. Annie Besant reported that during the stress of these early years her mother demonstrated clairvoyant abilities by being able to psychically follow her husband's funeral procession to the grave site while remaining at home, and by having foreknowledge that Alfred was soon destined to join his father in the afterlife.

After the death of her husband and youngest child, the mother moved the family to Harrow and operated a boarding house for school boys. This strategy permitted Henry to be educated at Harrow and subsequently attend Cambridge. Young Annie enjoyed playing with her older brother and his friends, and found that she was "as good a cricketer and climber as the best of them . . . (Besant 1885:15)." This confidence that she could perform as well as males would serve Besant well in her adult public career.

In an age in which education for girls was not stressed, Annie was fortunate in 1855 to be taken in by a wealthy maiden lady, Ellen Marryat, who imparted to her an education that emphasized independent study. Marryat personally selected the young Besant to receive this education, and succeeded in imparting to her a love of learning and research. Marryat was an Evangelical Christian, and set an example of helping and educating the poor. Annie taught in Marryat's Sunday school for poor children and saved small amounts of money to help the less fortunate. In 1861 Besant's horizons were broadened when she accompanied Marryat on a trip to Europe during which she was confirmed in an Anglican church in Paris.

Besant's education with Marryat ended when she was sixteen, but she continued her studies by reading Plato, Homer, Dante, numerous early church fathers, and contemporary Anglican theologians. She idealized clergymen as being close to God, but she was briefly troubled when she attempted to make a harmony of the four gospels and found that they did not agree; however, she temporarily put this disturbing discovery out of her thoughts.

Besant was the guest of the family of William Roberts, an attorney in Manchester, when he defended a group of Irish insurgents on the charge of killing a police officer while liberating comrades from a police wagon. The murder was accidental and the killer had escaped, but the three men in custody were convicted and hanged. Annie's involvement in this exciting episode and her observation of the prejudice against the defendants awakened in her a love of radical social justice causes. Roberts informed Annie about the brutal conditions, particularly in the mines, in which the lower classes worked. Roberts believed that the producers of a nation's wealth had the right to a fair share of that wealth and decent living and working conditions.

In 1867 at age twenty, Besant married Rev. Frank Besant. Initially she thought that being a vicar's wife would enable her to serve the less fortunate. She subsequently wanted to break off the engagement, but her mother would not permit her to go back on her word. Annie was totally ignorant of the sexual facts of life on her wedding night. In the marriage, sometimes her husband asserted his authority over his wife by means of violence, and Annie was bored with the housewife's life and wanted to spend her time reading. Besant tried her hand at writing and had some stories accepted for publication in a family magazine. Besant was thrilled when she earned a few shillings for her stories and experienced "a delightful sense of independence," which was shattered when she learned from her

husband “that all a married woman earned by law belonged to her owner . . . (Besant 1885:46).” Their son, Arthur Digby, was born January 16, 1869, and daughter Mabel was born August 28, 1870.

In 1871 both Besant’s children became ill with whooping cough, and little Mabel nearly died. In an age in which there were no vaccinations or antibiotics, there was little that an anxious mother could do for her suffering child. During Mabel’s lengthy crisis, Besant questioned why a supposedly benevolent God would cause an innocent child to suffer. Besant resolved to question every Christian doctrine. She read the leading theologians of her day, but began to lose her Christian faith. During this time, Frank Besant became the vicar in Sibsey, where Annie directly witnessed the abysmal living conditions of farm laborers.

Theistic Period, 1872-1874 (ages 25 to 27). Due to domestic violence in the Besant home, Annie Besant increasingly stayed in London with her mother. There in 1872 she met Rev. Charles Voysey, who preached in St. George’s Hall in St. John’s Wood to a congregation known as the Theistic Church. Rev. Voysey had been tried for heresy in 1869 and expelled from the Church of England.

Besant was relieved to meet a person like herself, who no longer believed in the authority of the Bible, or in the doctrines of original sin, eternal punishment, and vicarious atonement, but who still believed in God. Besant continued reading the works of leading theologians under Rev. Voysey’s guidance, and concluded that she no longer believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ. From this time Besant refused to take communion in her husband’s church.

Also in London, Besant met Thomas Scott and was befriended by him and his family. Scott utilized his own funds to distribute heretical pamphlets. Besant wrote two anonymous pamphlets for Scott questioning the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth.

In 1873 Besant discovered that she possessed the gift of public speaking, although in that era it was not considered appropriate for women to speak before audiences containing men. She was practicing the organ in her husband’s empty church when she thought she would like to know how it felt to speak from the pulpit. Perhaps while observing her husband preach she had concluded that she could do it better.

“Some vague fancies were stirring in me, that I could speak if I had the chance; very vague they were, for the notion that I might ever speak on the platform had never dawned on me; only the longing to find outlet in words was in me; the feeling that I had something to say, and the yearning to say it.”

After addressing the empty pews, she concluded:

“And it seemed then so impossible — if ever the chance came to me of public work, that at least this power of melodious utterance should win hearing for any message I had to bring (Besant 1885:72).”

On one of her visits to her mother, Besant was given the ultimatum that either she must resume taking communion or not return to her husband’s house. She did not return, and her brother obtained a legal separation giving her custody of Mabel and a small monthly allowance from her husband. Besant’s mother died shortly after she separated from her husband. She was poor but she earned some money by writing more “heretical” pamphlets for Scott. Besant moved further into radical and Freethought circles by attending the sermons of Moncure Conway at South Place Chapel in Finsbury. She continued her reading and questioning about ultimate reality and wrote an article *On the Nature and Existence of God*.

Atheist Period, 1874-1889 (ages 27 to 42). Besant first read atheist Charles Bradlaugh’s newspaper, *The National Reformer*, in 1874. She was attracted to Bradlaugh’s National Secular Society because it was committed to social reform to ameliorate conditions for the lower classes. Besant joined the National Secular Society even though she still considered herself to be a theist. After Bradlaugh read Besant’s *On the Nature and Existence of God*, he informed her that her conclusions had brought her to atheism. Bradlaugh offered Besant a job as a reporter for *The National Reformer*, and she quickly became its sub-editor, a vice-president of the National Secular Society, and one of

Freethought's foremost public lecturers, who braved rough and rowdy crowds of men who did not hesitate to throw rocks and fists at the female atheist.

During her intellectual transition to atheism, Besant was attracted to monism. She concluded that spirit and matter were identical in substance while different in manifestation; God being the one substance was identical with creation. She thought, however, that humans did not have faculties to perceive God as distinct from the universe. Urged by Bradlaugh, Besant concluded that as long as humans had no faculties to perceive God, then for practical purposes God did not exist for humanity. The atheism of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh did not say there was no God, but that the atheist was *without* God, i.e., without a conception of God. As an atheist, Besant was of the opinion that humans would never develop faculties to perceive God. She was a monist but held to monistic materialism. Besant subsequently embraced Theosophy in great part due to its teaching that humans could develop faculties to perceive God, i.e., spiritual ultimate reality. As a Theosophist, she believed that there was a spiritual unity that produced and supported material existence.

In 1877 Besant and Bradlaugh were drawn into a controversy about the right to publish a book on contraception entitled *The Fruits of Philosophy* (originally published in 1832) by an American physician, Charles Knowlton. Besant was convinced that accessible information about how to limit offspring was essential to alleviating poverty and improving women's health. As a test case, Besant and Bradlaugh's Freethought Publishing Company published the Knowlton book, and they personally sold copies at their shop. They were prosecuted for publishing and selling pornography. At the trial, Bradlaugh and Besant presented their own cases and were recognized as performing brilliantly. After the sensational performance by Besant in court, women in Great Britain began to be admitted into legal training. In defending the right to publish the Knowlton book, Besant became the first woman to publicly advocate the dissemination of information on contraception. In the following year Dr. Aletta Jacobs opened the first birth control clinic in Holland (Nethercot 1960:129, 144). The jury delivered a confusing verdict because they wanted to condemn the book but exonerate the defendants. The judge interpreted the verdict as guilty, but this was later overturned on a technicality.

Because the physiology of the Knowlton book was out of date, Besant wrote her own guide to contraception entitled *The Law of Population*. Over 90,000 copies were sold, and 100,000 copies were sold of an American reprint. *The Law of Population* was translated into Swedish, Danish, Dutch, German, and Italian, (Wessinger 1988:54). and in no country was legal action taken to suppress its publication.

Subsequently Besant lost custody of Mabel due to her atheism and advocacy of contraception. She attempted to gain a divorce at this time, but it was ruled that the legal separation precluded divorce. When she observed that her visits upset her children, she resolved to have no contact with them until they were old enough to decide for themselves. Years later when Besant was a theosophist, Digby went to his mother when he was twenty-one and Mabel followed although she was only twenty. They both joined the Theosophical Society, and their father refused to have further contact with them. Besant's custody case publicized the fact that legal reform was needed since in England married women had no legal right to their children (Nethercot 1960:144).

Besant enrolled in 1879 at the London University to earn a Bachelor of Science degree. She earned honors in most of her exams, but she was never granted the degree. Besant reported that due to the examiner's prejudice against her atheism and her advocacy of birth control, she was failed three times in chemistry. Besant continued studying science and she taught science classes for nine years at the Hall of Science, a meeting place for Freethinkers.

In 1885 Besant joined the Fabian Society, a group committed to political and nonviolent socialist reform. Bradlaugh was opposed to socialism, so she resigned as co-editor of *The National Reformer*. Besant and Bradlaugh were increasingly going in different ways, and Besant was working with other individuals such as George Bernard Shaw, one of the members of the Fabian Society.

Besant and [William T. STEAD](#) formed the short-lived Law and Liberty League to assist people arrested in the conflict over free speech in Trafalgar Square in London. They briefly published a magazine called the *Link*, subtitled *A Journal for the Servants of Man*. She and Stead saw their Law

and Liberty League as a “New Church dedicated to the Service of Man,” that would work for the earthly collective salvation of humanity. Besant first was intrigued by Auguste Comte’s idea of creating a religion dedicated to the service of humanity toward the end of her theistic period.

While maintaining her membership in the Fabian Society, Besant also joined the Social Democratic Federation. In 1888 she and Herbert Burrows contributed greatly to the birth of the trade union movement in Britain by organizing the strike of the Bryant and May match girls for better working conditions (the young women suffered from phosphorous poisoning). Besant was elected to the London School Board where she secured free meals for poor children, and persuaded the Board not to purchase goods from producers that ran sweat shops (Nethercot 1960:271).

Toward the end of Besant’s atheistic period, she increasingly questioned her materialism, which no longer seemed adequate to explain the mysteries of human nature posed by mesmerism, seances, and psychic phenomena. The pages of *The National Reformer* and a magazine published solely by Besant named *Our Corner* revealed her increasing interest in the comparative study of religions and particularly in Asian religions. Besant also began to wonder whether mere social reform was enough to bring about the collective human happiness for which she worked. She began to think that a transformation in human nature itself was needed.

First Eighteen Years as a Theosophist, 1889-1907 (ages 42 to 60). Besant converted to Theosophy in 1889 after reviewing Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) for W. T. Stead’s *Pall Mall Gazette*. She immediately embraced theosophy’s monism which taught a continuity of spirit and matter and emphasized the ultimacy of spirit. The theosophical belief in a unifying One Existence provided a philosophical justification for universal brotherhood to which Besant always had been committed. She was naturally drawn to Blavatsky’s emphasis on altruism and self-sacrificing work for the welfare of others. The theosophical doctrines of spiritual monism and reincarnation and karma satisfactorily answered the question of suffering and evil that had so long been troubling her. Instead of a personal deity separate from his creation and seemingly uncaring about suffering, theosophy explained that the one universal life was immanent in all creatures and itself experienced the joy and suffering of material existence, these experiences being necessary for progressive evolution of consciousness back to its source. [REINCARNATION](#) was the mechanism of progressive evolution, and [KARMA](#) was a natural law which ensured impartial justice; the individual soul reaped in future lives the results of actions sown in previous lives. Theosophy additionally taught that by meditation a person could develop the spiritual faculty of wisdom, the [BUDDHI](#), by which the spiritual ultimate reality was perceived. Belief in the ability to perceive divine reality was very important to convincing Besant to reject her atheism. Theosophy with its doctrine of a divine plan for progressive human evolution directed by perfected persons possessing superhuman powers, the Masters, offered her assurance that human transformation would be effected. Besant believed that she was called by the Masters to carry out activities in the world to help accomplish this transformation by assisting the development of the sixth sub-race of the Fifth [ROOT RACE](#), that would give birth to the Sixth Root Race, a human type in which the buddhic faculty was awakened. This would create what she termed the “New Civilization,” in which there would be perfect harmony due to the collective buddhic perception of oneness.

Annie Besant with members in Adyar; on her right is J. Krishnamurti and on her left are C.W. Leadbeater and J. Nityananda

Besant quickly became Blavatsky’s favored disciple; her facility in writing and speaking enabled her to present theosophy in accessible language. She became co-editor of Blavatsky’s journal, [LUCIFER](#). Besant became a member of the Inner Group of the Esoteric Section formed by Blavatsky to teach selected students. Besant’s house became Blavatsky’s home and the headquarters of the Blavatsky Lodge in London of which Besant was elected president.

After joining the Theosophical Society, Besant resigned as a vice-president of the National Secular Society, and the Freethought Publishing Company was ended. She also resigned from the Fabian Society, although she remained for a time a member of the Social Democratic Federation. Becoming a

theosophist did not cause Besant to cease being a socialist; many years later she attempted to include socialist principles in her proposed constitution for a self-governing India, and she believed that the New Civilization would have a socialist economy.

In 1890 Besant met Charles W. LEADBEATER, a former Anglican priest who became a noted psychic in the Theosophical Society. Working with Leadbeater, Besant cultivated her own psychic vision of subtle realms and past lives. Her collaboration in psychic research with Leadbeater was very important to Besant, because it provided her with the empirical evidence that disproved atheism. From 1895 Besant collaborated with Charles Leadbeater in psychic explorations of past lives of theosophists and the subtle matter of the universe, producing the books [OCCULT CHEMISTRY](#) and [THOUGHT-FORMS](#), the latter being about the influence of thought on the physical world and containing color pictures of shapes that thought took in the subtle realms.

After Blavatsky's death in 1891 the question of the future leadership of the Theosophical Society arose. [Henry Steel OLCOTT](#) remained president but had been considering resigning. Blavatsky's apparent endorsement of Besant as her successor tended to displace [William Q. JUDGE](#), who headed the Section in the United States and was one of the founding members of the Theosophical Society. While Besant, Olcott, and Judge met in London to settle Blavatsky's affairs, Besant began to receive letters from the Masters, that she subsequently concluded were forged by Judge. These letters seemed to be aimed at alienating Besant from Olcott and ensuring her loyalty to Judge. For a time Besant and Judge were joint Outer Heads of the Esoteric Section, but due to the controversy over the suspect [MAHĀTMA](#) letters Besant pressured Judge to resign. Judge instead issued a statement deposing Besant as joint head of the Esoteric Section, and in 1895 the American Section led by Judge voted to secede from the Theosophical Society. Judge died within a year and leadership of this organization passed to [Katherine TINGLEY](#) who focused on building a theosophical community at Point Loma, California (Nethercot 1960:382-85; Nethercot 1963:23-31, 37-41, 54; Wessinger 1991).

In 1893 Besant made her first visit to India, where the international headquarters of the Theosophical Society is located in Adyar, Madras (Chennai). She believed that India was her true homeland due to earlier incarnations there. Besant and Olcott immediately embarked on a speaking tour to uplift Indian pride in the indigenous religious culture. Besant believed that she had a particular mission to uplift Hindu culture and Hindu self-esteem that had been battered by Western colonialism. Besant's work in India on behalf of Hinduism paralleled that of Olcott in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) on behalf of Buddhism. She immersed herself in Hindu culture, and studied Sanskrit and Hindu scriptures with an Indian Theosophist, Bhagavan Das. She published a widely distributed translation of the [BHAGAVAD-GĪTĀ](#) (1895) as well as a commentary on that text. Besant was drawn to Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the Vedic *Upaniṣads* because they taught a spiritual monism.

Besant did not enter Indian politics for nearly twenty years, and despite her active feminism in England, she wisely refrained from attempting to impose Western feminist values on Indians; she believed that she was not qualified to comment on the status of Indian women until she was thoroughly knowledgeable about Indian culture (Anderson 1994a and 1994b).

Besant initially focused on giving public lectures about the glories of Indian civilization and philosophy aimed at raising Indian pride, and on founding schools, which unlike schools run by Christian missionaries or by the British government, imparted knowledge about India and Hinduism in addition to a Western secular education. Besant founded in 1898 the Central Hindu College and high school for boys, and George S. ARUNDALE served as its head master. In 1904 the Central Hindu Girls' School was founded with Francesca ARUNDALE as its principal and its major financial benefactor; this was one of the first schools founded for Indian girls. She founded numerous other schools in India that were administered by the Theosophical Educational Trust or given to local Indian organizations to operate. Besant wrote a Hindu catechism entitled *Sanātana Dharma* in three versions for use in primary schools, high schools, and colleges; she wrote a *Universal Textbook of Religion and Morals* in three volumes for students of all religions, edited *The Central Hindu College Magazine*, a *Journal for Hindu Boys*, which had a circulation of nearly 15,000, and published articles written by boys from all over India. Besant lectured to the Central Hindu College students on the great Hindu epics, the RĀMĀYANA and the MAHĀBHĀRATA, and the *Central Hindu College*

Magazine reported on her speeches such as “Ancient Ideals of Modern Life” and “In Defense of Hinduism” (Nethercot 1963:62-63, 67-71, 73; Wessinger 1990:24-25).

Annie Besant was elected president of the Theosophical Society in 1907 after Olcott’s death. She was elected by a large majority, but there was controversy. Eminent members of the Theosophical Society such as Upendranath BASU, [Bertram KEIGHTLEY](#), and G. R. S. MEAD disputed that the Masters [MORYA](#) and [KOOT HOOMI](#) had appeared to Olcott on his deathbed to designate Besant his successor. The critics pointed out that the president of the Theosophical Society must be elected, not appointed by “psychic interference.” These reservations seemed to carry little weight with the members who elected Besant on a majority vote in her favor of 9,572 to 1,089. Besant, as usual, strongly affirmed the right of each Theosophist to freedom of belief, but she also strongly affirmed her own conviction that she was a servant of the Masters (Wessinger 1991). Besant was re-elected president of the Theosophical Society for terms of seven years until the end of her life.

President of the Theosophical Society (Adyar), 1907-1933 (ages 60 to 86). Annie Besant immediately put her leadership skills to good use as the second president of the Theosophical Society. She founded the THEOSOPHICAL ORDER OF SERVICE, AND THE ROUND TABLE, an organization for young people. She expanded the estate at Adyar, Madras, to 266 acres, and initiated building projects. Besant became the editor of *The Theosophist*, the magazine initiated by Blavatsky. Charles W. Leadbeater, who had earlier resigned in controversial circumstances, was reinstated (1908) as a member of the Theosophical Society, and this caused a number of prominent Theosophists, including A. P. Sinnett, to resign (he rejoined in July 1911 and was appointed Vice-President). However, due to Besant’s public speaking and publishing, the membership of the Theosophical Society grew from 14,700 in 1907 to its peak membership in 1928 of over 45,000 (Wessinger 1991:103).

In 1908 Besant and Leadbeater began lecturing on the imminent return of the Christ or the World-Teacher, *jagadguru*. This idea may have originated with Leadbeater, but Besant was the prominent announcer of the World-Teacher. Besant taught that the World-Teacher, Christ, or BODHISATTVA was an office within the Occult Hierarchy that was currently held by the Lord MAITREYA (who in the Buddhist tradition is believed to be the future Buddha). Leadbeater drew Besant’s attention to a twelve-year-old Brahmin boy living at the Adyar Headquarters; this was J. KRISHNAMURTI and Leadbeater had been struck by the boy’s beautiful aura. With the agreement of Besant and the boy’s father, Leadbeater initiated a training regimen for Krishnamurti and his brother.

Lord Maitreya was explained to be living in the remote Himalayas, his physical body too sensitive to be exposed to the rough vibrations of ordinary society. If Krishnamurti’s preparation was successful, both Besant and Leadbeater considered that he might become a vehicle for the Lord Maitreya; his consciousness would willingly surrender his body to the indwelling consciousness of the Lord Maitreya. Besant taught that Jesus of Nazareth, after being trained by the Essenes, similarly had given his body to be used by the Lord MAITREYA. Besant adopted Krishnamurti and his brother, Nityananda, and Leadbeater began Krishnamurti’s occult training. Krishnamurti was said to have been instructed by the Masters in the subtle realms while his physical body slept, and this resulted in the little book attributed to Krishnamurti entitled *At the Feet of the Master*.

Annie Besant created an international organization named the Order of the Star in the East, whose members awaited the imminent coming of the World-Teacher. She taught that the World-Teacher would present teachings to awaken the *buddhi* in the emerging sixth sub-race and Sixth Root Race; the perception of universal unity would create human unity and peace in the New Civilization; the teachings of the World-Teacher would be the basis of a new religion that would move humanity into the perfect New Civilization.

The teaching about the imminent appearance of the World-Teacher was controversial, and some Theosophists were unable to reconcile such a teaching with the theosophy of Blavatsky. Rudolf STEINER, the head of the German Section, said that anyone who joined the Order of the Star of the East would be expelled from the German Theosophical Society. Besant pointed out that such a directive contravened the rule of freedom of belief for all members and warned of the consequences should Steiner persist in this course. Steiner and his supporters refused to cancel the directive and

Besant, under the instruction of the Council, had the charter of the German Section revoked; fifty-five of the sixty-nine lodges of the German Section chose to secede under the leadership of Steiner, who then founded the Anthroposophical Society. Besant issued a new charter to the remaining lodges constituting them as the German Section of the Theosophical Society (Adyar) (Nethercot 1963:177).

In October 1912, Narayaniah, the father of Krishnamurti and Nityananda, attempted to regain custody of his sons, asserting that he did not want them in close proximity of Leadbeater. The High Court of Madras found in favor of the father, but Besant successfully appealed the decision in London and thus retained custody of the boys who elected to remain under her care. Krishnamurti and Nityananda were educated in London under the tutelage of George ARUNDALE, and they remained there during World War I. Nityananda did very well in his studies, but Krishnamurti failed his university entrance examinations.

Leadbeater and Besant published the results of their investigations into the past lives of themselves and others in *Man: Whence, How and Whither* in 1913. Investigations into the past lives of Krishnamurti and other theosophists were published in *The Theosophist* during 1914 and 1915 and later in the book, *The Lives of Alcyone* (1924). The persons whose past lives were described in these books were said to belong to a band of "Servers," who obedient to the orders of the Occult Hierarchy incarnated at key times and places to work to further the progressive evolution of humanity. Besant selected the name Herakles, suggestive of her great personal strength expended in many heroic labors, to designate her reincarnating ego whose adventures and loves were depicted (Nethercot 1963:202-10). Theosophy taught that the sexless self was successively incarnated in both male and female bodies. The past lives remembered by Besant were both female and male, but most of them were male. Besant believed that in the fourth century CE she was Hypatia, the beautiful Neoplatonic philosopher in Alexandria, who was murdered by a Christian mob. She also believed that she was Giordano Bruno, a Dominican monk burned at the stake in 1600 in Rome for his pantheism. Nancy Fix Anderson has suggested that Besant's memories of previous incarnations permitted Besant to achieve self-integration and psychological balance of her "masculine" and "feminine" qualities (Anderson 1993).

Political and Social Work for India, 1913-1925. (ages 66 to 78) In 1913 Besant felt called by the Rishi AGASTYA, the Master said to be in charge of India, to enter politics to gain Indian Home Rule and to effect social reforms in Indian society. She believed that Indian self-government within an Indo-British commonwealth was an essential component of the divine plan to effect human transformation. Besant believed that the connection between India and Great Britain was providential and should be maintained; English would be the language in which the great truths of Indian philosophy would be disseminated in the West. However it had become critical to the divine plan that India become self-governing. India by presenting the sublime truths of Hindu monistic philosophy to the world would cause the New Civilization to become established; thus India was destined to become the Holy Land of the entire world.

Besant introduced to India the nationwide political agitation that she had learned from Bradlaugh. This type of political work included public rallies and speeches, newspaper and pamphlet campaigns, and litigation. In 1914 Besant began publishing two political newspapers, a weekly entitled *The Commonwealth*, and a daily named *New India*. In 1914 she founded the Young Men's Indian Association in Madras, and she revived an earlier organization called the Sons and Daughters of India. Because the Baden-Powell organization admitted only Europeans, in 1916 Besant started the Indian Boy Scouts Association. The aim of all these organizations was to cultivate civic duty and patriotism in young Indians. In 1916 Besant founded the All-India Home Rule League, which by the end of 1917 had a membership of 27,000. Numerous young Indian men, including Jawaharlal NEHRU, gained their first political experience as members of Besant's Home Rule League (Nethercot 1963:232, 237, 255-56; Wessinger 1988:78-81).

Besant was convinced that before India could gain Home Rule and become the spiritual teacher of the world, first India had to clean its own house of corrupt social customs and extend the hand of brotherhood to its own socially oppressed groups, namely untouchables and women and to this end she founded the ORDER OF THE BROTHERS OF SERVICE composed of men willing to break social customs such as early marriage of daughters. Besant gave a series of lectures entitled "Wake Up, India" about the need for social reform and she particularly targeted early marriage and premature

motherhood, the Hindu prohibition of remarriage of widows, the oppression of the untouchables, and the need for education of both girls and members of the lowest castes as areas in which reform was urgently needed. Besant asserted that every human being labeled by Hindu society as untouchable was a spark of the One Self that dwelt in all, and therefore was worthy of respect, education, and a decent standard of living. Besant boldly declared that it was criminal for adult men to marry girls and thereby force them to bear children at a young age. She deplored the condemnation to perpetual widowhood of thousands of girls married in early childhood and strongly promoted education for girls. Besant served as president of the Women's Indian Association founded in 1917 by Margaret E. COUSINS and Dorothy Jinarājādāsa (Wessinger 1990:25-31).

In 1917 Besant along with George S. Arundale and Bahmanji P. WADIA were interned by the Government of Madras for their writings in *New India*. While under house arrest, Besant designed and flew a Home Rule flag of green and red representing the Muslims and Hindus of India, which later, with additional features (white representing the untouchables and Gandhi's spinning wheel representing Indian self-sufficiency) became the national flag of India (Nethercot 1963:263).

There was widespread protest following Besant's internment, and during this time she was elected president of the Indian National Congress, the organization that would shortly become the political party led by Mohandas GANDHI. When Besant, Arundale, and Wadia were released, they were given heroes' welcomes in Madras, Calcutta, and Benares (Nethercot 1963:265-66).

Besant presided over the December 1917 meeting in Calcutta of the Indian National Congress. This meeting drew a record attendance of 4,967 delegates and about 5,000 visitors including about 400 women. Besant was not only the first woman to be elected president of the Indian National Congress, but she was the first president to make that position into an active year-long job. Under Besant's leadership, the 1917 Congress passed a resolution that the social disabilities of untouchables should be abolished (Wessinger 1990:53).

For complex reasons, Besant's political popularity declined in India shortly after her presidency of the Indian National Congress. There were specific political conflicts, but generally the Indian men who were political leaders seemed nervous of Besant's authority after she gained a significant political position. Also Mohandas Gandhi's political star was rapidly rising, and Besant disagreed with his method of political protest called *Satyāgraha*. She pointed out that despite the rhetoric of nonviolence, whenever Gandhi called for mass Satyāgraha demonstrations and general strikes, violence inevitably erupted. Besant believed that the masses of Gandhi's followers were not sufficiently mature to adhere to nonviolence and she saw Gandhi's demand for the complete independence of India severed from a commonwealth connection to Great Britain as contradicting the divine plan for the establishment of the New Civilization and human unity. Besant lost a great deal of her popularity in India due to her opposition to Gandhi (Wessinger 1988:244-51; Wessinger 1990:53).

From 1923 through 1925 Besant sponsored meetings of a National Convention of Indian delegates to frame a Commonwealth of India Bill. This bill was presented to the British Parliament, but it never received widespread support in India or Great Britain.

The increasing number of articles on the World-Teacher in *New India* from 1925 to 1927 indicated that Besant was focusing more on Krishnamurti to accomplish the human transformation leading to the New Civilization (Wessinger 1988:251).

The World-Teacher, 1925-1933 (Besant ages 78 to 86). Besant taught that a World-Teacher appeared at the beginning of each new sub-race to present teachings that would become the religious basis for that civilization. She believed that the sixth sub-race was beginning to develop within the Fifth Root Race, and that the new sub-race would give birth to the Sixth Root Race. Although admitting that new races evolved slowly, she believed that within a generation or two the new human type possessing fully awakened buddhi would be established. Based on Blavatsky's predictions, Besant taught that southern California, Australia, and New Zealand were particular areas in which the new humanity was developing. Besant purchased land she named Happy Valley in the beautiful Ojai valley in California, and predicted that the new race would first develop there. According to Besant, a person of any color or ethnicity who had the awakened buddhic intuition perceiving unity was a

member of the newly evolving race. The new religion taught by the World-Teacher would awaken the buddhic faculty in humanity. Thus the religion of the New Civilization would be based on direct experience and knowledge rather than on faith. The widespread perception of unity would establish the New Civilization characterized by universal brotherhood.

Besant believed that her most important work was to prepare the world for the imminent appearance of the World-Teacher. She regarded herself as having special orders from the Masters to help build up the New Civilization by her work in India and in relation to the World-Teacher.

Those expecting that the Lord Maitreya would use Krishnamurti as his vehicle believed that the first manifestation occurred in Benares on December 28, 1912, as Krishnamurti was handing out membership certificates at a gathering of the Order of the Star in the East. For a number of years after that event, Krishnamurti was highly ambivalent about the role that had been designated for him. In 1922 while in Ojai, California, a painful process marked by delirium and illness began for Krishnamurti that would reoccur periodically for the rest of his life. Theosophists interpreted it as the necessary preparation for the indwelling of the Lord Maitreya. On that first occasion after three days of pain, Krishnamurti found peace one evening while sitting under a pepper tree. His companions were understood to report that they sensed the presence of the Lord Maitreya. Annie Besant and others believed that the next public manifestation of the Lord Maitreya occurred on December 28, 1925, as Krishnamurti addressed members of the Order of the Star in the East under the huge banyan tree on the Adyar estate.

Krishnamurti began to speak more as the Lord Maitreya, saying that he was now one with his Beloved. Annie Besant said that Krishnamurti was the World-Teacher, and that contrary to her expectation that Krishnamurti would vacate his body, Krishnamurti's consciousness was blended with a portion of the consciousness of the Lord Maitreya. To signify the arrival of the World-Teacher, the phrase "in the East" was dropped from the name of the Order of the Star.

Krishnamurti's teachings were iconoclastic in that he downplayed the significance of the Masters, stated that over-concern with reincarnation could inhibit enlightenment which was focused in the present moment, said that organizations could not convey truth, and asserted that he was adamantly opposed to creating a new religion focused on himself. He advised people not to be concerned about his identity, but to judge his teachings on their own merit. He stressed that liberation could be accomplished only by each individual, and that it was counterproductive to rely on any authority including himself. Because Krishnamurti believed that the devotional attitude taken by so many people toward himself was impeding their liberation, he dissolved the Order of the Star in 1929 in Annie Besant's presence.

Krishnamurti never denied that he was the World-Teacher, although he attempted to separate his teachings from that expectation. In fact, Krishnamurti's long teaching career was aimed at pointing the way for individuals to experience what he termed "constant voluntary awareness" or "choiceless awareness," a fully awakened consciousness free from thoughts, doctrines, and preconceptions, that was focused in the present moment — a Zen-like monistic perception of unity (Wessinger 1988:263-305). Krishnamurti's biographers who were his close companions subsequently revealed that Krishnamurti identified himself with the World-Teacher until the end of his life, although he never stated so in his public lectures (Jayakar 1986:126-28, 132, 408, 439-40, 488, 496, 498; Sloss 1991). Although Charles Leadbeater believed that "the Coming" had "gone wrong" (Tillett 1982:240), Annie Besant proclaimed her confidence in Krishnamurti as the World-Teacher, and that she did not expect Krishnamurti to be exactly as she had predicted. "People always want to make a greater Being in their own image, and then complain if He is different." Besant certainly retained her belief in the Masters. She acknowledged that organizations could not promote personal spirituality which came from within, but she believed that organizations were useful in propagating knowledge. Despite Krishnamurti's disclaimers that he would have nothing to do with disciples and a new religion, Besant continued to believe until her death that a new religion would be founded upon Krishnamurti's teachings after he died. Besant said that Krishnamurti was her spiritual superior, and that where she did not agree with or comprehend his teachings she suspended her judgment until she could grow in understanding (Wessinger 1988:292-97).

Annie Besant died at the Theosophical Society headquarters at Adyar, Madras (now Chennai), on September 20, 1933. Her body was cremated on a pyre lit by Charles Leadbeater. Part of her ashes were poured into the Ganges at Benares by her colleague in Sanskrit studies, Bhagavan Das. The rest of her ashes were deposited at the Garden of Remembrance on the Adyar estate, which marks the site of Besant's cremation. Besant had earlier dedicated this site to the Theosophical Order of Service. Charles Leadbeater died six months later, and his ashes were also placed in the Garden of Remembrance. George Arundale was elected the third president of the Theosophical society, and he said that Krishnamurti should not return to the Theosophical Society's Adyar estate. However, until the end of his life in 1986, Krishnamurti returned to the area in conjunction with the December conventions of the Theosophical Society, and numerous Theosophists attended his talks. Krishnamurti first returned to the Theosophical Society estate in 1980 during the presidency of his friend, Radha Burnier, a close student of his teachings (Wessinger 1988:96-97).

Conclusion. Annie Besant's long and complex career was devoted to the service of humanity. All of her work was dedicated to the transformation of the human condition and the elimination of suffering. Her millennial hope for a New Civilization brought about by the imminent appearance of a messiah has influenced the contemporary New Age movement, particularly through the writings of Alice BAILEY; this influence is seen most clearly in the contemporary predictions of Benjamin Creme about the imminent appearance of the Lord Maitreya (Wessinger 1988:323-48; Wessinger 1989:60-69). During her lifetime, Annie Besant served as a model for British, Indian, and American women who wished to move beyond the traditional female role limited to the domestic sphere; the example of Annie Besant's life continues to serve as a model for women who wish to balance the nurturing of others with creative public work.

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